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Talent in international business defined

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CHAPTER 2

Characteristics of highly talented international business professionals defined:

Qualitative study among international business professionals

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the characteristics of talent in relation to international business to facilitate selection and development of talent in human resources (HR) and human resource development (HRD).

Design/methodology/approach

A mixed method design was used: focus groups with business professionals to identify the characteristics of highly talented international business professionals (HTIBP), resulting in a concept profile; Delphi study for validation; systematic comparison of the open coding results to existing literature to identify characteristics of talent.

Findings

A specific and concise profile of HTIBP has been developed. This profile has five domains: achieving results; communicating; innovating; self-reflecting; seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context. From literature cross-referencing, we have identified innovating, being creative and having a drive to achieve results are most distinguishing for HTIBP.

Practical implications

The paper facilitates an ongoing discussion about what constitutes talent, and offers new perspectives for companies to consider when selecting and developing talent.

Originality/value

The conceptual contribution of the paper offers a fresh and practical empirical perspective on what talent entails.

Keywords

Talent management, HRD, Talent, Management, Competencies, Mixed method

Paper type

Research paper

Introduction

Global businesses now realise the importance of recruiting talented workers with the potential to perform excellently (Beechler and Woodward, 2009; Silzer and Church, 2009; Tarique and Schuler, 2010). There is a growing awareness that talent is an asset to many international businesses (Allen et al., 2010; Shavinina, 2008). Therefore, the demand for high performers and talented workers is increasing globally and talent management has become important for multinational companies (Farndale et al., 2010; Florida, 2006). Establishing what is meant by talent is a challenge as there is no agreed definition in literature (Brown and Tannock, 2009). Besides, the topic of what exactly should be managed or what constitutes talent has generally been neglected (Brown and Tannock, 2009). The management of talent necessitates the definition and identification of talent that is sought (Nilsson and Ellström, 2012). Garavan et al. (2012) suggest that what talent is for the purpose of development is important. Our study concentrates on establishing what characterises highly talented international professionals, based on the views of professionals themselves, which can assist in talent identification and development. With international business professionals, we refer to individuals with a managerial or leadership position in an internationally operating company. Managers play a pivotal role in the organisation, and the development of managers should be a key component in talent development (Sheehan, 2012, p. 68).

Talent and competencies in international business

Talent can be associated with high performers in a general sense or linked to how well an individual can perform in general or related to a specific job (Nilsson and Ellström, 2012). In our research, we adhere to the description of individual talent as highly performing international business professionals.

Tansley (2011) describes that there are marked differences in the extent to which the term talent is used in organisational practice and that individual talent in organisations is seen as a complex mix of employees' skills, knowledge, cognitive ability and potential (SKA's). A talented individual must then possess this mix to be able to perform outstandingly, or excellently, to help the organisation attain goals. The mix of employees' SKA's are referred to as competencies. Whether generic or specific competencies, or both, ought to be addressed in talent development, is a point of discussion (Garavan et al., 2012).

Competencies research in international business, trying to establish an “ideal” set of competencies, has been ongoing since McClelland (1973) urged to test competencies, rather than intelligence. With globalisation in international business, demands placed on international managers and leaders are changing, and the research into the skillset needed for the most effective, efficient global leader has grown exponentially (Boyatzis, 1982, 2008; Bückner and Poutsma, 2010; Dries and Pepermans, 2012; Jokinen, 2005; Osland et al., 2006; Spreitzer et al., 1997).

Describing a set of skills and characteristics of effective leadership can also be seen in the studies on emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998), cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang, 2003) and the global mindset (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002; Javidan and Teagarden, 2011; Levy et al., 2007; Osland et al., 2006), and are all linked to managerial success and efficacy (Cavallo and Brienza, 2006; Goleman, 2003; Miller, 1999; Watkin, 2000).

Review studies have attempted to synergise existing literature on successful, effective global leadership and management. Jokinen’s review study (2005) categorised the abundance of competency descriptions available thus far into:

- core competencies, condition for the development of other competencies, often connected to personal characteristics;
- mental characteristics, characteristics that influence the way tasks or issues are approached; and
- behavioural characteristics, related to more explicit skills and the ability to perform concrete actions and tangible results.

Later review studies (Boyatzis, 2008; Bückner and Poutsma, 2010; Dries and Pepermans, 2012; Osland et al., 2006) have described global leadership and management competencies, which fit into Jokinen’s categories.

This literature on competencies is criticised for various reasons. No consensus has been reached as to how the competencies of international business professionals are labelled, as many competencies recur in different wording (Bückner and Poutsma, 2010; Levy et al., 2007; Mendenhall et al., 2012). Also, some studies are too descriptive (Bückner and Poutsma, 2010; Jokinen, 2005; Morrison, 2000). Some competencies differ from company to company, which contributes to conceptual confusion (Morrison, 2000). Additional points of

criticism are that there are too many competencies for one single person to all master (Conger and Ready, 2004). Osland and colleagues (2006) criticise that competency research does not distinguish between essential and non-essential competencies and that context is important. Hollenbeck and McCall (2003) state that leadership jobs are executed while using different talents at different times, and are accomplished in different ways, so there is no need to master all competencies. With these points of criticism, it has become apparent that clarity is needed especially in the current time.

As we face a complex changing economy, continuing globalisation, new technologies, new kinds of managerial skills and more sophisticated talent are needed (Ashton and Morton, 2005; Guthridge et al., 2008; Stahl et al., 2012). Besides this, ageing population (Calo, 2008) and increased mobility (Basri and Box, 2008; Beechler and Woodward, 2009; Tarique and Schuler, 2010) result in talent shortages, so there is an urgent need for talent.

Competency models are a blueprint of what talent to develop and are essential for the process of developing talent (Rothwell and Kazanas, 2003). However, with criticism about the competencies, it is important to establish what competencies distinguish highly talented international business professionals (HTIBP).

Talent and talent management

Talent management, referring to an organisation's efforts to attract, select, develop and retain talented key employees (Stahl et al., 2007), has emerged as a high priority issue for corporations. Conceptualising talent is relevant for talent management and development (Tansley, 2011). Talent is oftentimes taken for granted and not explicitly defined, (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). According to Wooldridge (2006), companies do not even know how to define "talent", let alone how to manage it.

In their review study on the definitions of talent in a business context, Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013) distinguish the object and the subject dimension to conceptualising talent. The object dimension, refers to exceptional characteristics and abilities of individuals, and the subject dimension describes talent as people who are inimitable, scarce and difficult to replace.

Our research is linked to the exclusive subject and object view on talent as we are concentrating on establishing competencies that are only associated with HTIBP. Seeing talent as innate supports that this is an exclusive group of people ranking at the top, or an elite subset of an organisation's population (Iles et al., 2010) or high potential and high performers (Ulrich and Smallwood, 2012). This is in line with giftedness theories, e.g. Gagné's theory of giftedness describes that gifts are innate abilities, and when systematically developed, become talent (Gagné, 2004). Sternberg's definition of giftedness is "expertise in development" (Sternberg, 2003, p. 109).

Ericsson's deliberate practice theory demonstrates a mastery approach to talent. Talent is "made" by deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2006), and that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice are required for reaching "talented" levels of performance.

The conceptualisation of talent influences talent management strategies. If talent includes everybody in the workforce, this fits an inclusive view on talent management. Each employee has a set of strengths and can add value to the company (Buckingham and Vosburgh, 2001; Nijs et al., 2014). An exclusive view on talent in the workforce, on the other hand, differentiates only employees who rank at the top in terms of capability and performance.

A mix of the subject-object dimension to talent and the inclusive-exclusive approach to differentiation of the workforce is described in talent management literature (Garavan et al., 2012; Iles et al., 2010):

- an "inclusive-subject" approach to talent, whereby talent is an all-encompassing term, referring to the entire workforce;
- an "inclusive-object approach", advocating development of talent of all employees, allowing everybody to reach his or her potential;
- the "exclusive-subject" approach, with the focus on developing top performers with exceptional skills and abilities (Stahl et al., 2007); and
- the "exclusive-object" approach, referring to talent in the right context, enabling them to apply this committedly in their job (Huselid et al., 2005).

This article sets out to help along the discussion about what competencies (SKA's) to concentrate on, in HRD, when developing talent. We aim to answer the following questions:

- Q1. What characterises “highly talented” international business professionals?
 Q2. How do these characteristics differ compared to competencies necessary for international business professionals as described in the literature?

Research methodology

To establish an answer to the first research question, data were collected, using the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For the data collection, two studies were conducted: focus group design and Delphi study. To answer the second research question, a third study was conducted, whereby the outcomes of the focus group design and the Delphi study were cross referenced with literature on global leadership and management competencies based on a review study by Jokinen (2005) with added competencies from additional review studies (Boyatzis, 2008; Bückner and Poutsma, 2010; Dries and Pepermans, 2012; Osland et al., 2006).

Study 1. Focus group design

Participants and procedure

An inter-professional focus group design was used to explore business professionals' perspectives on excellence. The group dynamics are valuable and provide the researcher with the participants' experience, views and why they have certain views (Burns and Bush, 2003; Kitzinger, 1994).

Three focus group discussions were organised with a convenience sample of 16 business professionals (six participants in group I, five participants in group II and five participants in group III). Recruitment of the focus group participants took place in The Netherlands. Non-random, judgemental quota sampling was used (Burns and Bush, 2003). The focus group participants needed to satisfy the following criteria: working as a business professional, at a medium- to large-sized internationally operating company with a minimum international business experience of three years. Medium-sized and large-sized companies defined in our research follow the parameters set by the European Union (European Commission, 2003). The positions of the focus group participants were in middle and senior management, for example: Personnel Director, Senior Corporate Sales Director Benelux, General Managers, Consultant and Management Trainer, Business Innovation Consultant. Industries varied, for example, innovative packaging systems, project management recruitment, computer technology corporation. The focus groups were guided by an experienced moderator. The moderator

merely ensured the discussion stayed on track and facilitated the discussion, ensuring equal contributions among participants (Greenbaum, 1998). The main question posed in the focus groups was: “What do you think characterises highly talented international business professionals?”.

A non-participating observer was also present during the focus group discussions. Each discussion lasted for approximately 90 minutes. With permission of the participants, the focus group discussions were audio-taped.

We identified the point of information saturation by using an iterative process as described by Hennink et al. (2010). After each focus group session, variation in the issues raised was assessed.

Data analysis

The recordings of the focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim, the contents of which were subjected to further analysis, using ATLAS.ti. We used the continuous cycle of collecting and analysing data according to grounded theory, as described by Hennink et al. (2010).

The transcripts were coded, using three stages of open, axial and selective coding by two researchers to ensure dialogical reliability (Sandbergh, 1997). In the open coding stage, constant comparison, using line-by-line coding, was conducted to identify broad categories in each individual transcript. In total, 89 categories were identified in this stage. Axial coding was the next stage in the analysis, in which categories were related to each other. This led to the identification of domains with items, which were later reduced in the final phase of analyses, the selective coding.

Results of study 1

After the assessment of the third focus group session, data saturation was reached. On the basis of the textual analysis of the focus group discussions, six domains marking HTIBP were established (Table I).

Study 2. Delphi panel for content validity

Participants and procedure

To refine the findings of the focus group sessions and to come to quantifiable consensus of what the characteristics of HTIBP are, a Delphi study among 30 international business professionals was conducted. The Delphi panel members

were selected using the following criteria: active career in international business for at least 10 years in 33 medium- to large-sized internationally operating companies; and a leadership role within the participants' professional setting. This included participants at academic and policy level. Examples of their positions in the companies and industries were for example: Chief Executive Officer (CEO), key account managers, lector and researcher, Chief Information Officer (CIO). Examples of industries are banking, gas trading company and insurance. Focus group participants were excluded.

Table I: Results of Study 1

Domain	Description
Analyse complex information	Combining expertise from different specialties and seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context.
Communicating	Communicating effectively by using language effectively in different cultural and professional settings.
Cultural sensitivity	Adapting one's professional approach to another culture and showing patience and control in culturally diverse environments.
Innovative	Thinking of new creative possibilities by "out of the box" thinking and improving ideas from others, while inspiring others to come up with ideas.
Results oriented	Showing perseverance in complex situations, taking responsibility for achieving goals, and showing entrepreneurship.
Self-reflection	Understanding one's strengths and weaknesses and acting upon it. Learning from mistakes and successes to improve oneself and taking care of one's physical health.

We provided the Delphi technique according to Lawshe (1975). To reach consensus on the characteristics of HTIBP, a survey instrument was developed with a three-point scale about the domains and the items resulting from the data analysis of the three focus group discussions. Furthermore, the location of the domains and the items was assessed with a four-point scale.

The Delphi method involved a panel of experts, independently providing their level of agreement with a series of statements.

Each expert was asked to express his or her professional opinion on whether or not the domains and items as described in the concept profile, meant to represent HTIBP, were indeed essential. This was measured by scale anchors: “Essential”, “Important but not essential” or “Not necessary”. The Delphi panel was repeated to obtain expert opinions until consensus was reached.

Of 30 contacted experts, the Delphi panel had 22 respondents in phase one, and 19 respondents in phase two.

Data analysis

The content-validity ratio was calculated as a means of quantifying the degree of consensus in the Delphi panel. This was done in accordance with the method, developed by Lawshe (1975), as described by the formula:

$$CVR = \frac{ne - N/2}{N/2}$$

In the formula, CVR represents the content-validity ratio, *ne* represents the number of Delphi panellists indicating essential about a specific domain or item and *N* represents the total number of Delphi panellists. The CVR ranges from 1 to 1. When all panellists indicate “essential”, the CVR is computed to 1. When half the panellists indicate “essential”, the CVR is zero. Values below zero indicate that the panellists reject a domain and/or an item (Lawshe, 1975). Only domains and items containing positive ratios, above 0.0, are considered as a component of the profile of HTIBP.

The panellists were asked to give their opinion on the content of the concept profile in two rounds. After having made mutations to the concept profile derived from the CVR calculations, this was repeated in a second round.

Not only content but also the location of domains and items was assessed by the Delphi panel in both rounds. The same procedure was followed, as with the assessment of content, with the difference that a four-point Likert scale was used (1 “The item is located entirely correctly” to 4 “The item needs to be relocated to another domain”). If 50 per cent of panellists assessed the item to be located entirely correctly, then the item was relocated.

Results of study 2

Round 1. As a result of the first Delphi round (Table II), 17 items were accepted

by the Delphi panel. For the second Delphi round, one item was rejected and the “Cultural Sensitivity” domain was renamed to “Acting in an International Context”.

Table II: Content validity ratio (CVR) after Delphi round 1

Domains and items	Judged as 'essential' by n -/-experts	Ratio (r)
<i>Achieving results</i>	15/19	0.58
Showing entrepreneurship	11/19	0.16
Showing perseverance in complex environments	14/22	0.27
Taking responsibility for achieving goals	18/22	0.64
<i>Acting in an international context</i>	7/19	-0.26*
Adapting one's professional approach to another culture	14/19	0.27
Showing patience and control in culturally diverse environments	16/22	0.45
Combining expertise from different specialties	16/22	0.45
Seeing patterns and inter-relationships in a global context	19/22	0.73*
<i>Communicating</i>	15/19	0.58
Continuing to ask questions to get a clear understanding of the situation	15/22	0.36
Listening actively to identify a problem or an opportunity	20/22	0.82
Using language effectively in different cultural and professional settings	19/22	0.73
<i>Innovating</i>	14/18	0.56
Coming up with creative ideas proactively	13/22	0.18
Improving ideas from others	14/22	0.27
Keeping up with the latest professional developments	19/22	0.73
Setting new quality standards	8/19	-0.16*
Showing inventive, new possibilities by thinking 'out of the box'	19/22	0.73
<i>Self-reflecting</i>	15/19	0.58
Improving oneself beneficial to the organisation	14/19	0.47
Showing independence in thinking of new possibilities	16/19	0.68
Understanding one's strengths and weaknesses, and acting upon it	14/22	0.27

Notes: *Changes after Delphi round 1: *Acting in an international context* was placed as a domain and *Seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context* as an item. *Setting new quality standards* was rejected.

Round 2. After the first Delphi, the revisions were subjected to a second Delphi panel round (Table II), resulting in consensus on the following domains as being essential for HTIBP: “Achieving Results” ($r = 0.58$), “Communicating” ($r = 0.58$), “Innovating” ($r = 0.56$), “Self-reflecting” ($r = 0.58$). However, the renamed domain “Acting in an International Context” did not achieve consensus among the panel members ($r = -0.26$). More than 50 per cent of panel members (10/19) stated that this domain was important but not essential to distinguishing talent. Remarks from panel members indicated that “international context” is so fundamental to being an international business professional that it is not a characteristic of highly talented professionals but rather a prerequisite for inclusion in the category of international business professional. In addition, the items within this domain all achieved consensus as being essential, “adapting one’s professional approach to another culture” ($r = 0.27$), “showing patience and control in culturally diverse environments” ($r = 0.45$), “combining expertise from different specialties” ($r = 0.45$) and “seeing patterns and inter-relationships in a global context” ($r = 0.73$). Further testing of the item “Seeing Patterns and inter-relationships in a global context” as an appropriate domain instead, resulted in the highest consensus ($r = 0.73$) and was included in the final HTIBP profile (Figure 1).

The Delphi rounds have resulted in an evidence-based HTIBP profile, consisting of five domains. HTIBP possesses the following mix of the HTIBP profile.

- *Seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context:* HTIBP see patterns and interrelationships, while combining expertise from different specialities in an international context, and in culturally diverse environments, where HTIBP remain patient, show control and can adapt the professional approach to other cultures.
- *Achieving results:* HTIBP achieve results and take responsibility for this, through showing entrepreneurship and perseverance in complex environments.
- *Communicating:* In addition, HTIBP have strong communication skills by listening actively for problem or opportunity identification, ask the right questions to be able to do so. They can use language effectively in different cultural and professional settings.
- *Innovating:* Besides characteristics pertaining to seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context, achieving results and communicating, HTIBP are also innovators who not only improve ideas from others, but who also come up with creative ideas and new possibilities proactively and

display “out of the box” thinking. Linked to this, HTIBP also wish to keep up with the latest developments.

- *Self-reflecting*: Finally, HTIBP are self-reflecting, understand their strengths and weaknesses and act accordingly and improve themselves, beneficial to the organisation. In addition, they show independence in thinking of new possibilities.

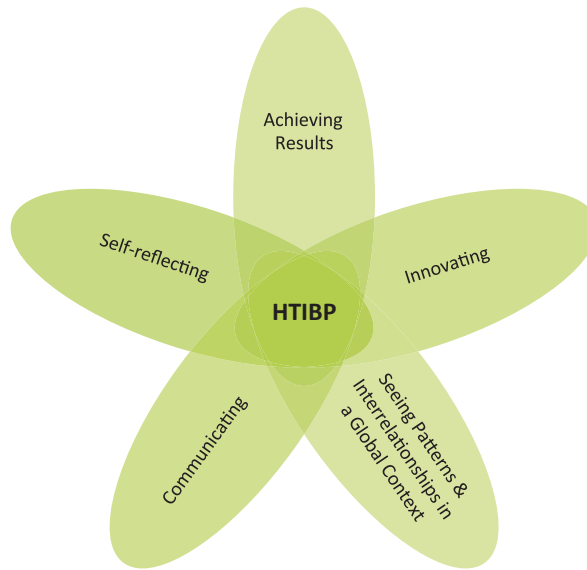


Figure 1: Profile of highly talented international business professionals

Study 3. Cross referencing with literature

Procedure

The findings of the focus group discussions and the Delphi panel rounds have been cross referenced with literature on competencies necessary for an international business professional. This has been done by cross checking the 89 codes, 6 domains and the 18 items as part of the open coding stage of the focus group design, against competencies described in multiple review studies (Boyatzis, 2008; Bückner and Poutsma, 2010; Dries and Pepermans, 2012; Jokinen, 2005, Osland et al., 2006) (Table I). This was conducted by two researchers independently from one another so as to ensure dialogical reliability (Sandbergh, 1997). The findings of the two researchers were compared until consensus was reached.

Results of study 3

The analysis has shown that the profile of HTIBP could not be completely placed into the literature-based competencies for an international business professional. The domain “Seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context” can be recognised in seeing the bigger picture, systems thinking and deductive reasoning, divergent thinking and pattern thinking. Furthermore, the domain “Communicating” is recognised in the review literature in the social skills, but also in cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural sensitivity and the global mindset. Finally, the domain “Self-reflection” can be recognised in the self-awareness and engagement in personal transformation and also in inquisitiveness and in resourcefulness. While these domains can be found multiple times in the review literature, this is not the case with the two remaining domains “Innovation” and “Achieving results”. We have found that the domain “Innovation”, with the item “Creativity”, could as such, not be recognised in review studies. Innovation and creativity were considered to be essential for HTIBP by focus group and Delphi participants. In the final HTIBP profile, it can be seen that “Innovation” is one of the five domains. Secondly, the domain “Achieving results” concerning “having a drive and being driven” were not clearly represented in the literature as such. In the recent review study by Dries and Pepermans (2012), the term “drive” occurs and mostly related to being motivated and showing perseverance. The items “having a drive and being driven” do not refer to personal engagement but rather to business performance and achieving results. The HTIBP domain “Achieving results” is meant to underpin the importance of having a drive to achieve results.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has identified competencies essential for HTIBP, according to professionals themselves. The study shows five domains: “Achieving results, Communicating, Innovating, Self-reflecting and Seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context” and 16 items (Figure 1). Cross references with the review studies showed that the domain “Achieving results”, with the items “having a drive and being driven” as well as the domain “Innovation”, with the item “creativity” in particular, are distinct characteristics of HTIBP. These were not explicitly found in the literature.

As the field has been under study since the early 70s, it is not surprising that there is already an abundance of competency literature, and alongside that, many lists

of competencies related to the international business professional. However, our study delivers a concise list of competencies specifically relating to HTIBP, established in the view of international business professionals themselves. As global companies increasingly realise the importance of talented workers (Allen et al., 2010; Tarique and Schuler, 2010), we have concentrated our study on competencies for talent. Our study has resulted in a set of competencies required for talented workers to attain excellence. The advantage of such a specific set of competencies is twofold. On the one hand, they are manageable for one single person to master, a known point of criticism of competency literature (Conger and Ready, 2004). On the other hand, only those competencies essential to HTIBP have been distinguished. Not distinguishing essential from non-essential competencies is other criticism made in relation to the competency literature. The HTIBP profile is evidence-based and compact with only five domains and 16 items, with behavioural aspects, making it rather practical and useful.

Literature expresses the importance for an international business professional of having a global mindset (Osland et al., 2006) and cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang, 2003). This global mind set and cultural intelligence is included in the HTIBP profile and can be found in the domain “Seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context” and in the domain “Communicating” explicitly in the behaviour aspect “using language effectively in different cultural and professional settings”. However, a global mindset needs be combined with certain behavioural attributes, which will lead to certain actions that impact organisational performance (Levy et al., 2007). These other behavioural attributes can be found in the other domains of the HTIBP profile.

The domains “Self-reflecting, Communicating, Seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context” are found to be essential to HTIBP, and identified in the literature, implying that these are competencies necessary for a competent international business professional as well as for HTIBP. HTIBP possess the spectrum of the five domains of the HTIBP profile, including “Innovation” and “Achieving results” and this may not be the case for a competent international business professional. Talented individuals are expected to display a spectrum of competencies that are part generic and part contextual (Garonzik et al., 2006). Furthermore, the extent to which the characteristics are present in international business professionals on the one hand and highly talented international professional on the other might differ.

Our study found that, when compared with the literature, the domain “Achieving results”, with the items “having a drive and being driven”, and the domain “Innovation”, with the item “creativity” in particular, are distinct characteristics of HTIBP.

The importance for HTIBP of being driven and being innovative and creative is in line with the literature related to giftedness. Gifted is a term that is used, next to the term talent, to describe business professionals who are considered to perform outstandingly in their field. Shavinina (2008) describes entrepreneurial giftedness as being creative by constantly generating ideas on how to make money and being innovative. Well-respected scholars in the field of giftedness theories mostly integrate creativity in their models, like Renzulli’s (2002) taxonomy of behavioural characteristics of giftedness, of which creativity and the concept of task commitment, i.e. motivation turned into action, form part. Creativity is also one of four domains of natural aptitude in Gagné’s (2004) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent. Sternberg’s (2003, 2005) WICS model of giftedness links creativity to talented individuals and to business leadership in that creative skills are needed to generate fresh ideas and to who embodies creative vision.

The HTIBP profile combines existing competencies literature in the field of international business, with the literature about high “giftedness”. Giftedness, described in relation to individual’s superior ability, is in line with the exclusive view on talent management. Companies often connect performance to talent, in line with giftedness scholars’ conception that talents are developed gifts (Gagné, 2004; Sternberg, 2005). Companies need to provide ample opportunity for talent to emerge in their talent management architecture (Gandz, 2006).

In the continuum of exclusive object-subject view on talent management, this research contributes particularly to the exclusive object approach, as we have established the competencies (SKA’s) of HTIBP.

Implications for theory and practice

The HTIBP domains consist of mostly generic skills, which is a valuable contribution to the question whether companies ought to address generic or specific skills in their talent management programmes (Garavan et al., 2012). Besides, this study provides companies with a clear idea of what competencies and characteristics are needed in their talent pool, which helps them build a

talent-rich pipeline without blockages (Gandz, 2006).

HTIBP, possessing the spectrum of the domains, are able to see patterns and interrelationships in a global context, and show independently what needs to be learned for what purpose. A shift to self-managed learning seems in line with our results (Garavan et al., 2012). Companies should consider offering HTIBP more freedom in developing their assignments so as to allow them to direct their own learning, while also achieving results and taking responsibility for this. This would form a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship. Companies would not only be able to keep talent, but also to attract more talented workers.

The importance of talent is also seen in higher education, where talented students are prepared for a career. The HTIB profile can also be used as a guide to develop such talent programmes. Talent programmes are strongly upcoming in Europe (Wolfensberger, 2015) and are designed to prepare talented students for “excellence” (Sirius Programme, 2012; Lanier, 2008). The talented students, for whom those programmes are designed, differ from other students with respect to the talent factors: intelligence, creative thinking, openness to experience, the desire to learn and the drive to excel (Scager et al., 2012). Such students also like to construe their own learning. Further research should be conducted how best to implement the HTIBP into talent programmes to create a best fit between preparing talented students to become talented workers who can perform excellently or outstandingly.

The programmes should place particular emphasis to the domains “Achieving results” and “Innovating”. The remaining domains should also be developed. Finally, a practical implication of the profile is that it is usable as a selection tool in the recruitment process of talented students for such programmes.

Limitations of the research

Our research has a few limitations. First, the focus group discussions were held in English, which may have disrupted the flow of participants’ contributions and their ability to express themselves. Presumably, this was not a problem for the participants as they had been informed beforehand that, if necessary, a switch to their native language would be no problem and this was not asked for.

Secondly, the research was conducted among internationally operating companies located in The Netherlands. There might be cultural bias in the

conception of what are essential characteristics of HTIBP. Same is true for specific industry backgrounds. Company requirements as to size and operating internationally were made; however, specific industry background was not a selection criteria. This would be an interesting avenue for additional research as is international validation.

Concluding remarks

Talent has become important for international business, and the competencies describing a highly talented international business professional needed to be established (Brown and Tannock, 2009). We have empirically established a compact, clear overview of competencies, related to describing HTIBP. These professionals possess the spectrum of the five domains of the HTIBP, of which two are most distinguishing.

We link to theories on giftedness and offer new insights for talent management and talent development. With the HTIBP profile, companies can identify talent and also offer opportunities for such employees with respect to development or guidance. Companies are advised to allow HTIBP to construe their own learning from their own experiences obtained.

This information will become increasingly relevant as talent shortages will continue for the foreseeable future, and organisations should not become complacent (McDonnell and Collings, 2011).

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